

# Nursing in ancient Egypt

This article has been translated from WikiSkripta; ready for the **editor's review**.

The idea of healing and nursing the sick exists in the medical papyri from Ancient Egypt, which are the most valuable source of knowledge of the ancient Egyptians:

## Cairo Papyrus

It dates back from the 1900s BC, and it is currently located at University College London. It was discovered by Sir William Mathew Flinders Petrie in 1889 in poor condition in the ruins of the Pharaoh's Palace in Cairo. It is a comprehensive document on ; *women's diseases* , describes methods for *pregnancy determination* , *fetal sex determination* . There is also a section of *veterinary medicine* .

## Smith's Papyrus

It is housed at the New York Academy of Medicine. It was acquired in 1862 by a young American Egyptologist, Edwin Smith. This papyrus allegedly comes from the same tomb in the Theban necropolis as Ebers' papyrus and dates back to the beginning of the 18th dynasty. It is a copy of an older papyrus, as the grammatical editing of the text suggests. The total length is 4.68 m, width 33 cm and has 12 sheets. It dates from about 1700 BC, but its origin is much older, it is believed that the document found is a copy and the original comes from Imhotep, a prominent physician. This papyrus introduces the *textbook traumatology* and discusses the *surgical care of head, nose, chin, ear, lip, bone, and spine injuries* . Each patient observation builds on a *precise and unchanging plan* : a clinical description, determination of the final diagnosis statement in terms of prognosis, and recommended treatment.

## Eber's Papyrus

It dates from 1500 BC It was discovered in 1862 in Thebes by George Ebers (1837-1898), who bought it from an Egyptian. Papyrus is 20 meters long and 30 cm wide, containing 108 pages with 20-22 lines. The text dates back to the 9th year of King Amenhotep I (approximately 1550 BC). It is safe to say that this is a copy of an older work from the Old Kingdom. It contains 875 different recipes without logical sorting. It deals with *diseases of children, skin, ears, eyes, women* . There are also "texts of prayers for the invocation of evil spirits", causing obsession and the first mentions of "mental disorders". It is the most important and longest papyrus ever stored in the library of the University of Leipzig. This papyrus mentions the "care" of the mentally ill, which was cared for in the temples through various exercises, walks in beautiful gardens, the sick also took part in rides on the Nile. Listening to music, dancing, entertainment was also common.

## Other papyri

There are other medical papyri – '*London Papyrus*' , '*Berlin Papyrus*' , '*Leyden Witch Papyrus (magic formulas)*' and others.



Imhotep

## Characteristics of care in Egypt

According to preserved documents, there were doctors in the Old Kingdom - "physicists" who were educated in medical schools. Treatment and care of patients consisted of the administration of diuretics, laxatives, drugs against intestinal parasites. Cosmetic ointments were applied. In the Egyptian pharmacy, there were medicines still used today – wormwood, poppy, castor oil, animal fats, etc. Suppositories were also applied, intestinal and vaginal lavages were performed, and a fumigant was used extensively. E.g. it was smoked at the time of delivery to strengthen the uterine contractions. The women sat down on a pot in which certain means were heated. The doctors prepared the medicines themselves. No nurses have assisted doctors (the literature does not yet prove their existence), but they are documented by "bandages", healers, masseurs, lay healers.

## Care of a woman in labor

**Wealthy women** gave birth in a large temple where they were entrusted to the care of a *priestess*. She had the role of *midwife*. Women gave birth squatting on bricks, which were used as a primitive maternity bed. To induce labor as smoked with hippopotamus dung. Various cultic and magical rites were performed during childbirth. The papyrus does not mention births. Probably because he wasn't a doctor's business. It was considered a normal part of human life and a doctor did not have to assist with it. Several midwives were present at the birth. Usually three or four women were present to help the mother. In various depictions, the baby during birth is shown with its head down and its upper limbs extended. There is no information about ligation of the umbilical cord in the Egyptian literature. The placenta was sometimes kept in a dried state until the death of the individual.

Only some midwives were professionally educated and had the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully manage childbirth. This occupation was impure and not highly valued. That is why we lack obstetricians among doctors in ancient times. They were invited to births only in case of complications. Whether the newborn would die or not was judged by the strength of the cry and facial expression. Great care was given to breastfeeding. Noble ladies in particular had several nurseries at their disposal.

Children were highly valued in Egypt, they were considered a gift from God. Nurses and educators also took care of the children.

## Wound Healing

The Egyptians contributed to mechanical methods of wound healing. **splints** were used to immobilize the injured limb and thus prevent further damage. They also tried to bring the edges of the wound closer to each other and **sew** them together with a needle and thread, **fix** them together with cloaca and strips of cotton fabric (primitive Steristrip). They also "stitched" the wounds with the help of giant ants. In this case, the ant applied to the wound, the edges of which were drawn to each other, and when the ant bit, the body was twisted. Several physician assistants are attested to tending to the wounded on construction sites—applying splints to broken limbs, treating scorpion bites, moving around construction sites, and intervening when needed. *Minor injuries* – on the first day, a bandage made of fresh meat was applied, and on the following days a bandage made of a mixture of lard, honey and plant tampons. Injuries to the supraorbital arch were sutured with linen thread or fine tapes made from animal intestines. Fractures and dislocations were treated as they are today: first set and then immobilized with wooden splints and bandages.



Medical instruments used by the ancient Egyptians

## Social customs in Egypt

The **clothing** of the Egyptians was **simple**. Due to the warm weather, it was not of particular importance. The common people ate 3 times a day. Pork was not eaten. This was considered impure. Otherwise, the **diet was varied** and balanced. Fish, poultry, but also goat meat were popular. Advanced beekeeping dates back to at least 4,500 years BC. In addition to honey, figs, dates, and raisins were also used as sweeteners. Sugarcane was cultivated in India in prehistoric times, and sugar began to be refined in Venice in the 15th century. Honey was the most important sweetener in all ancient civilizations.

## Hygienic care

Some households had **bathrooms** and **flush toilets**. However, sewage from the houses flowed in the middle of the street. Hygienic regulations were observed in Egypt and the inhabitants took good care of their bodies. They washed twice a day and before meals. They didn't know soap. They cleaned their skin with oil or sand and smeared it with ointments. Most common Egyptians have never known a bathroom. They cleaned their teeth with wooden sticks and chewed balls of myrrh. In this way, bad breath was removed. They wore their hair short to prevent insects from settling in it. The Egyptians painted them with perfumed ointments and oils. Women's cosmetics represented a high degree of perfection. Recipes against hair loss were also known. Egyptians used **wooden brushes** to clean their teeth.

## The decline of care for the sick

With the advent of the New Empire, the prosperous slave society declines and the primitive scientific component disappears in the care of the sick, replaced by superstitions, belief in supernatural forces and demons. Doctors - physicists are replaced **by priests** - spellcasters. **Exorcism** takes its place. The administration of medicines containing animal feces is also documented. In Egypt, there was an idea that diseases are caused by another being (demon, spirit, worm) that enters the human body. With the help of these "medicines" (however absurd it may seem to us from our point of view) an aversion to the human body was to be induced and the being was to leave the human body. Note: **Imhotep** (around 2900 BC) represents an important figure in Egyptian history. He worked as a doctor, war surgeon, court minister of Pharaoh Djoser, and as an architect. He is the author of the stepped pyramid in Saqqara. Later he was promoted to the god of medicine, he was called the physician of gods and men.

# Links

## Related Articles

- History of nursing
- History of nursing/Prehistoric times
- History of nursing/Antiquity
  - Nursing in Ancient India
  - Nursing in Ancient China
  - Nursing in Ancient Greece
  - Nursing in Ancient Rome

- History of Nursing/Middle Ages
- History of Nursing/Modern Age
- History of nursing/19. century

## References

- HALIOUA, Bruno. *Medicína v době faraonů*. 1. edition. prague : Nakladatelství Brána, 2004. ISBN 80-7243-229-X.